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## WEAPONS AND EQUIPMENT

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### US warfighters engage with iPod-based tactical aid

Scott R Gourley

#### Key Points

- The US 10th Mountain Division is deploying new translation system in [Iraq](#) and [Afghanistan](#)
- iPod-based devices offer soldiers one-way video, written and verbal translation capabilities

Elements of the US Army's 10th Mountain Division are deploying to [Iraq](#) and [Afghanistan](#) equipped with new one-way translation devices based on video models of the Apple iPod personal entertainment system.

Called Vcommunicator Mobile, the commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) systems are being provided by Vcom3D (Orlando, Florida). The company is delivering the devices under contract to the US Army Program Executive Office for Simulation Training and Instrumentation (PEO STRI).

Programme origins for the new one-way translators date back to 2006 when Vcom3D displayed a concept device at the I/ITSEC conference in Orlando. This device was viewed by representatives from the 10th Mountain Division, who saw a need for the tactical aid during their upcoming 2007 deployments to [Iraq](#) 1st Brigade Combat Team (BCT) and [Afghanistan](#) 4th BCT.

Company representatives noted that subsequent meetings with soldiers helped them to refine the system design concept. "It was developed from that, based on using the missions that they perform, and prioritising them based on

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what they are most likely to do in both [Iraq](#) and [Afghanistan](#)," explained Company President and Chief Executive Officer Carol Wideman.

In April 2007 the 10th Mountain Division submitted an Urgent Need Statement to PEO STRI for a one-way language translation device.

The resulting 'sources sought' announcement noted: "10th Mountain Division units have a requirement for a multifunctional, multimedia language and culture learning device. The identified system must provide one-way translation and cultural knowledge for both the Iraqi Arabic and Iraqi Kurdish languages. Primary use for the device will be at the squad/team/individual level allowing small unit leaders the ability to provide directions and guidance to the local populace during the conduct of operations.

"Soldiers must be able to utilise the device easily to support a variety of missions to include vehicle checkpoint operations; entry checkpoint operations; raids; patrols; cordon and knock, and other critical missions. The device must be compact, rugged and intuitive to use, to allow soldiers to make use of the device quickly with minimum training. The system must be able to serve as a language and cultural training device that soldiers can use to improve their language capability and cultural skills, including non-verbal gestures as they correlate with verbal dialogue.

"The overall system must include a user-friendly authoring/editing tool by which units and/or their linguists may update or create both verbal communications and non-verbal gestures thereby allowing for the ability to adapt the technology to the ever-changing tactical environment."

The announcement postulated a requirement for 260 systems, with the first half delivered in late 2007 and the remaining systems at the beginning of 2008.

The first 130 systems, delivered to 10th Mountain's Iraq-bound 1st BCT, feature both Iraqi Arabic and Iraqi Kurdish languages. Through the use of the iPod scroll wheel and video display, the vest-worn iPod devices provide the soldiers with one-way video, written, and verbal translation capabilities in the field as well as the opportunity for personal language and culture training during downtime periods.

The second 130 systems were fielded to the Afghanistan-bound 4th BCT. In addition to featuring the Pashto and Dari languages, the short time lag between fielding also allowed the 4th BCT to select the newly released Apple iPod 'nano' as their Vcommunicator Mobile platform. Although the 'nano' design offers a smaller screen, its compact size allowed the system to be repackaged in a wrist-mount configuration.

In addition to the pre-loaded information, an associated authoring suite, consisting of Vcom3D's Studio and Gesture Builder products, allows soldiers with little or no animation experience to generate dynamic, life-like video characters. Training on the two packages takes just six hours according to company representatives.

To date, approximately two-dozen soldiers in the two BCTs have received the authoring suite training, with each of those individuals then responsible for "managing" up to 20

of the devices in theatre.

Longer-range US Department of Defense tactical translator plans appear to focus on a two-way speech-to-speech (2WSTS) translation device, as evidenced by a late August 2007 solicitation for 500 handheld 2WSTS translation devices and 150 laptop 2WSTS translation devices.

However, while earlier 2WSTS 'sources sought' announcements called for a "real-time capability to communicate with local populations in modern standard Arabic (MSA); Iraqi Arabic; Turkish; Kurdish; Pashto; Dari; and Farsi", the August solicitation was limited to "the capability to translate bi-directional English to Iraqi-Arabic".

Additional units have reportedly expressed interest in the one-way Vcommunicator Mobile COTS designs.



*The video iPod 'nano' fielded to the 10th Mountain Division's 4th BCT allows wrist-worn configuration. (PEO STRI) 1193016*

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